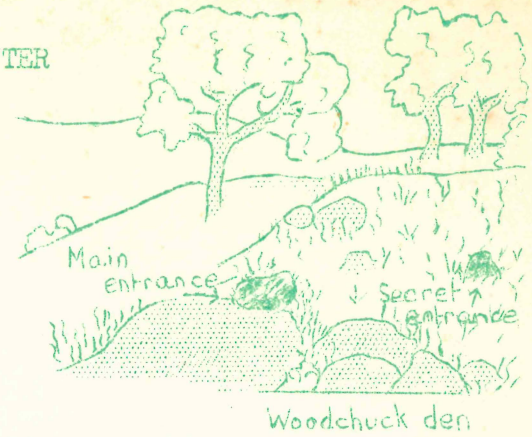
THAMES SCIENCE CENTER

NATURE NOTES



January 1963

Groundhog or Woodchuck

Marmota Monax

There are varied accounts of how this animal was named. Some feel that "woodchuck" came over to us from a combination of Indian names. This writer after several attempts at pronouncing them has decided that this theory is rather far fetched. In old rural England, "chuck" or "chucky" was a word meaning pig. Since the colonists found him burrowing in the ground, groundhog was a logical name. Other early settlers noticed that he lived in the open woods, thus the name woodchuck meaning pig-of-the-woods.

The groundhog legend is even harder to track down than the origin of the animal's name. Some investigators feel that this myth originated in Europe prior to Christian times when the hedgehog was considered a weather prophet. Later, the badger was supposed to predict the weather on Candlemas Day (Feb. 2). The colonists brought their myth to the New World with them. Finding neither hedgehog nor badger where they first settled, the title of weather prophet was conferred on the unsuspecting woodchuck. According to the legend now, if the woodchuck comes out of his den on February 2 and sees his shadow, we can expect another six weeks of winter. If he doesn't appear, an early spring is predicted.

Construction of the Burrow:

The entrance is usually built on the side of a hill. A tunnel slants downwards for four or five feet, then it makes a gradual turn sideways at which point there is a mound of soil in the passageway which serves as an obstacle against intruders. The tunnel continues for an additional 25 feet or more before it rises to an emergency exit. Every bit of dirt is pulled into the tunnel when an exit is being built. This helps prevent the exits, also known as "plunge holes," from being discovered on the surface of the ground. Sometimes lateral tunnels leading to additional exits are built later on. A main chamber, called a den, is built beneath the frost line. It is here that the young are reared and the woodchuck hibernates in winter. There is also a side chamber used for droppings which

is periodically cleaned out by the animal. This is one of the reasons the mound at the entrance continues to grow. The mound also serves as a lookout station.

The naturalist W.J. Hamilton, Jr. discovered that woodchucks, at least in New York state, often have both a summer and a winter home. He dug up many of the burrows in the winter months that had been active up until the end of August, but with no success in locating a hibernating animal. In February, he noticed woodchuck tracks on the snow in a woodlot next to the field he had dug up earlier. Hamilton discovered that the woodchucks had moved into burrows among the trees.

Hibernation:

In this area, woodchucks disappear for the winter between August 30th and the first of October. At first they sleep lightly, often awakening to venture forth. Soon they sleep soundly for longer periods of time until at last they have reached the state of deep hibernation. They curl up tightly, their heart slows down from a summer rate of 80 beats per minute to 4 or 5, body temperature drops from 96.8° F. to as low as 38°, and rate of breathing averages less than once a minute. (Nonhibernating woodchucks breath 25 to 30 times a minute and an excited woodchuck as many as 100 times). F.G. Benedict found that hibernating woodchucks loose surprisingly little weight. "This was known to be due to accumulation of moisture by the body, especially by the fur, which was enough to balance the amount given off at the very low breathing rate." There may be a difference of four to six weeks between the end of hibernation and the date when the woodchuck is again able to find food to eat. This length of time without food explains why other naturalists claim the woodchuck will lose up to one third of its summer weight before it emerges in the spring.

Mating and Care of the Young

The male woodchuck comes out at night, usually starting in February. A careful observer can often see their tracks in the snow. Because they are solitary animals, the male has to dig tunnels through the snow in order to locate the burrow of a female. Mating continues until the last of the winter snows disappear. A nest is built of grasses in which the female gives birth to a litter of about four each year. At birth, woodchucks weigh an ounce a piece. The babies are unable to see for the first four weeks which tends to keep them in the nest. The nest is changed daily until the young are "house broken". At five weeks the young pups leave the den to romp and play by the entrance under their mother's watchful eye. At six to eight weeks, the young woodchucks are on their own. Often the mother drives them away from her burrow. The young may share a burrow with another animal or more likely find a deserted hole, burrow, or fox den to occupy for the winter. Next year he will build his own burrow.

Little known facts about the Woodchuck:

(1) At one feeding a woodchuck may eat plants equal to 1/3 of its weight.

(2) Woodchucks are solitary animals and even a pair will not share the same burrow.

(3) A woodchuck's life expectancy is five years.

(4) Woodchucks can swim if need be to escape an enemy or find richer pastures.

(5) Woodchucks can climb trees! What for? They are fond of the maple sap as is the red squirrel and have to climb to get it. Incidently, they climb down a tree head first following the squirrel's example.

(6) A woodchuck's main enemies are men, dogs, and foxes in that order.

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